

The Foundation for Learning: The Relationship Between Education and Housing



- High mobility among the poor has a negative impact on education for the mobile child *and* his or her peers.
- Homeless children are the most mobile, and also most impacted regarding their education.
- Rising housing costs are also affecting teachers and their ability to acquire affordable housing.
- Homeownership provides the necessary stability and positive environment that benefits children's academic achievement.



Housing Justice!

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Academic achievement strongly depends on the housing one lives in. Housing provides the environment to learn, feel safe, and grow roots. When a family cannot afford decent housing, a child's progress in school often suffers. The use of the word 'mobility' in this brief refers to the need for families to move frequently in order to find jobs or housing they can afford.

Role of Poverty

High housing costs and changing jobs keep families very mobile. As housing costs rise, paying for other needs becomes difficult, and the resulting trade-offs may adversely affect a child's learning.

• QUALITY OF HOUSING

Substandard and/or overcrowded housing become the more "affordable" option. These conditions are related to an increase in long-term health problems, with children being the most susceptible, leading to higher absenteeism in school.^{1,2,8} It also proves a distracting and unsafe environment for any young learner and an unlikely place to form successful study habits.¹ Older housing has higher incidences of lead poisoning, which can directly cause learning disabilities in a child.^{1,2}

• NUTRITIOUS FOOD

Cost-burdened families are less able to provide ample amounts of nutritious food. Poorer concentration and learning difficulties, particularly in reading and math, are common consequences to malnutrition and hunger.³

• TRANSPORTATION

Transporting a child may interfere with a parent's ability to work and save for stable

housing.² Transportation costs become so high that it is a barrier to even bring a child to school.⁴

Extreme poverty may result in homelessness. When homeless, children face severe mobility and an even greater barrier to learning and education.¹

Mobility Disrupts Learning

Colorado ranks second in the nation, next to Nevada, for the number of residents who moved last year.⁵ Mobility among military families or moving to a more affluent district are the two exceptions where mobility does not appear to be detrimental to education.⁶

However, this is not the case for many low-income families. The immediate problem of mobility is that school records and immunization records get lost or cannot be transferred, creating delays for a child to enroll in the new school.⁷ Placement assessments can also prolong a child's enrollment or place a child in an inadequate or inappropriate classroom.⁷

The second problem, and the one most influential, is the sequence of lessons being disrupted due to absence, inconsistency of lessons, different teachers, and changing curricula.^{3,8} As a consequence, the basic knowledge to build on is never gained. For a mobile student it may take four to six months to fully adjust academically to a transfer.⁶ These students are half as likely to graduate as their non-mobile peers and twice as likely to repeat a grade.^{6,8}

Multiple moves occurring at young ages (when stability is most important) compound the problem. If a child moves more than three times before eighth grade, they are four times as

likely to drop out of school.⁸

Besides academic suffering, moving disrupts social networks and support systems for the child and parents, and isolates them from the support they need to adjust and achieve success. Emotional stability is compromised in both parent and child, and the child is more likely to develop social, emotional, and behavioral problems that further upset the learning process.²



Mobility also makes the home environment unstable, leaving the child no place outside of the classroom to study or learn, and feel secure and rooted.¹ Parents, due to changing priorities, are less able to be as involved in their children's education as they might otherwise be.

Homeless children

Regarding education, homeless children are most vulnerable. For them transportation to school is not always available, changing schools is frequent, and the shelter system creates more instability. As of May 2003, 5,963 homeless children were counted in Colorado public schools.¹⁰

The McKinney-Vento Act of 1987 was established to ensure that all homeless children and youth receive equal access to the free, appropriate education provided to other children. Reauthorized in 2001, it clarifies school district responsibilities to children and youth identified as homeless.⁷ The act has made

some progress to help homeless children receive a fuller education, but there is still much lacking in the program, and without adequate funding the program is not nearly as effective.

Everyone suffers

It may be simple to assume that mobility affects only the mobile family; however, *everyone* in a classroom is affected by high mobility, and suffers by it. Mobility creates a chaotic, disruptive environment for the whole classroom.



Teachers must devote more time and resources into catching up mobile students and are less able to direct attention toward other students.⁸ In other cases, they view transient students as less competent and will be less likely to commit to those students when they are thought to be only passing through.³ Teachers are also more likely to focus on subjects in isolation rather than integrate all the lessons. The other students, then, have continually reviewed lessons, little introduction of new concepts, and teachers with less energy.⁹ Standardized test results show that all students in a highly mobile area score lower than in areas where mobility is low.⁶

Teachers in highly mobile areas experience higher rates of burnout and move away from those areas, leaving those schools with less experienced teachers and staff turnover.³

Teachers need housing!

Teachers themselves are affected by the affordability of housing. In areas where housing costs are quite

expensive, especially resort areas, teachers find it difficult to live in those towns or contend with the commutes when living outside. A Glenwood Springs newspaper documented this struggle, citing a survey to which 403 Roaring Forks District teachers had responded about their housing situations in 2001:

- 41% regarded housing as a moderate to critical need
- 13% said housing affordability directly impacted their decision to stay in the district.¹¹

When *teachers* cannot afford housing, it makes it even more difficult to offer educational consistency within a school, further impeding children's access to a full, rich education.

Housing as a solution?

Homeownership may be the key to success in school. Children scored up to 7% higher in reading and up to 9% higher in math when their families owned their homes rather than renting.¹² A new study by Mercy Housing is preliminarily showing similar results: as soon as previously homeless and highly mobile children obtain stable housing, their overall well-being increases.¹³ The stress of not knowing where they will sleep that night, not having their own space, and living in unsafe or overcrowded conditions begins to fade, and they can focus again on school and homework. In as little as three months after moving into permanent housing, parents reported improvements in their children's schooling.¹³ In all areas, socially, emotionally, and academically, parents reported their children were doing better. One resident reflects:

Since we have been living here at Merced, we feel so settled and so secure with everything in our everyday lives. My girls feel the same way and it shows in their attitude and their

schoolwork. They are doing so well in school and things are just getting better and better... Our good life all begins when you have a solid stable home.¹⁴



Housing is a socially and academically profitable investment. David Rusk, an urban planner, studied Denver schools, and argues that "Housing Policy is School Policy," citing that most neighborhoods do not enroll racially or economically diverse students, and that can carry a major impact on every student's education.¹⁵ Integrating low-income children into predominantly middle-class schools has the best outcome.¹⁵

Other researchers argue that funding put toward housing subsidies and more affordable housing units is more cost-effective than the same funds put into school and teacher improvements.^{1,3,9}

Families need more affordable housing options. Stable housing provides the necessary foundation to become self-sufficient, leading to more favorable results in education. More affordable housing would also greatly impact teachers and their ability to live and work in the same school district.

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"Policies aimed at improving housing conditions may be more cost-effective in raising educational attainment than equivalent spending in schools."¹

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